

INTERVIEWING WOUNDED WARRIORS

“THE WEALTH OF KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE WE DEVELOP IN THE MILITARY IS PRICELESS—WE’RE GIVEN AN INCREDIBLE AMOUNT OF RESPONSIBILITY AT A YOUNG AGE. WE UNDERSTAND HOW TO FOCUS AND ACCOMPLISH A SPECIFIC GOAL AND WORK AS A TEAM, AND THOSE SKILLS COME WITH US WHEN WE LEAVE THE MILITARY.”

— Retired SGM Taylor Njagu, who now works for the Navy as a civilian

Many civilian employers have admitted challenges when it comes to interviewing Veterans, who tend to have difficulty explaining how their military experience relates to the needs of the civilian employer. While Veterans will be quick to praise their battalion or unit, they are reluctant to praise themselves in interviews, so civilian employers often feel like Veteran candidates are not “selling themselves.”

It is important to remember that the concept of “professional presentation” is different for former military personnel than for civilians. Military personnel (particularly those recently separated from military service) often present themselves with eyes forward, back straight, and using “Sir” and “Ma’am,” often without much smiling. This behavior may be perceived as cold, distant, unapproachable, or demonstrating a lack of social skills. While this is generally not the case, these perceptions cause many Veterans to be dismissed early in the interview process.

Former military personnel may need permission to “speak freely” to create a comfort level where they can appear in the most positive light. Hiring managers should be encouraged to be patient with these candidates and ask probing follow up questions to find qualities not apparent at first glance. It is worth remembering that Veteran candidates, unlike many civilian candidates, may not be accustomed to interviewing and may require a little latitude.

INTERVIEWING BEST PRACTICE

A good practice when interviewing is to ask every candidate the following question:

“Have you read the job description? Yes or no - can you perform the essential functions of the job with or without reasonable accommodation?”

By asking this question, you are not asking the candidate to disclose whether or not they have a disability, but are ensuring they can perform the job, while making it clear that as an employer you understand the reasonable accommodations process, and are not likely to discriminate due to disability.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

Most standard interview questions you would typically ask any other candidate are appropriate for wounded warriors, such as questions related to management style, problem solving, and strengths/weaknesses. Consider phrasing your questions to ensure the interviewee understands you are referring to both civilian and military work experience, such as:

- *“Tell me about the type of training and education you received while in the military.”*
- *“Were you involved in day-to-day management of personnel and/or supplies?”*
- *“How many people did you supervise?”*
- *“If you managed resources such as supplies and/or equipment, what was the net worth of these resources?”*

QUESTIONS TO AVOID

Questions relevant to experience or training received while in the military, or to determine eligibility for any Veteran’s preference required by law, are acceptable. However, some questions to avoid include:

- *“Did you receive an honorable discharge?”* Only federal agencies or those that assign a Veterans’ hiring preference or have requirements related to security clearances should ask questions related to military discharge.
- *“I notice that you’re in the National Guard...are you going to be called up for duty anytime soon?”* This is similar to asking a woman if she is planning to have a baby soon. Remember, it is unlawful to discriminate against someone because of membership in any branch of the military, including the National Guard or Reserves.
- *“Did you see any action over there?” “Did you lose your arm getting hit by an IED?” “Have you seen a psychiatrist since you’ve been back?”* Questions related to deployments to Iraq or Afghanistan may be interpreted as trying to determine if the Veteran has post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injury and could be construed as violation of the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) or the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

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